

Animal Husbandry as an Indicator of Cultural Change: Villa de Vilauba

Iberia, as an early province of Rome, has long been part of the heated debate concerning the nature of Roman imperialism in the west (for summary Keay 2001). Though the dispute over the type of social, cultural, military, and economic power Rome wielded over its territories is entrenched in modern scholarship, the use of faunal data to investigate cultural change in Spain is a relatively new development. Using faunal evidence for both the pre-Roman and Roman phases at Villa de Vilauba, a Roman agricultural production center located near the north-eastern coast of Spain, my goal is to assess how the individuals at the villa responded to Roman influence and explore the degree to which local agency is evident in animal husbandry decisions.

Villa de Vilauba, located in the Roman province of Tarraconensis, functioned as an agricultural center in the middle of the Catalanian region for nearly 800 years (Castanyer & Tremoleda 1999). Although the villa was occupied from the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE to the first decades of the 7th century CE, here I limit my discussion to the material from the 1st century CE through the 5th century CE in order to investigate the impact of Roman influence on this villa. The faunal assemblages from the site are contextualized within their local economic framework and are compared to the animal production levels recorded at other sites from the region of ancient Tarraconensis, and more widely, the rest of Hispania (Albizuri & Nadal 1999; Colominas 2013). This not only allows us to gauge the effect of the Roman conquest on livestock production within the villa, but also on the region overall. The zooarchaeological evidence from this production center is then analyzed to assess whether the villa was producing a surplus, which would indicate involvement in both local and long-distance Roman trade networks.

The analysis focuses on the three primary domestic livestock types of the ancient Mediterranean (ovicaprine [sheep and goats], pigs, and cattle), this villa conforms with, at the most basic level, King's (1988; 1999) concept of diet 'Romanization'. The increased frequency in both pig and cattle production align with King's model of the impact of Romanization on animal economies, but not necessarily for the reasons he offers. The villa owners acted as agents in determining what fauna they would incorporate into their estates and for what purpose. Economic gain, rather than mimicking Roman foodways, was the primary concern of the villa owners in the selection of cattle and the implementation of better husbandry practices. In doing so they were able to produce a larger yield of both cattle and agricultural produce. Pork did successfully make it into Spanish diets, but against King's hypothesis, it did not overwhelm the abundance of other fauna found on this site. Rather, the presence of pigs supplemented ovicaprine production, providing another source of income for the estate along with cattle. Faunal remains thus provide conclusive evidence that villa owners actively determined what fauna they would incorporate into their estates and in doing so they chose to incorporate Roman foodways and husbandry into their own practices in order to gain access to surrounding Roman trade networks.

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